

Swordfish Experiment

In September 1995 newcomers to the Namibian fishing industry were invited to France as guests of the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the Technical Institute for Seafood Development (ID Mer) of Lorient, France.

Following an address by Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Dr Abraham Iyambo, at the Lorient fisheries exhibition, French companies showed considerable interest in Namibia and lively debates ensued as to whether there were swordfish along the coast of Namibia.

A Food and Agriculture Organisation publication *The Living Marine Resources of Namibia* indicated that swordfish *Xiphias gladius* was occasionally caught as a bycatch in the tuna longline fishery.

Swordfish are large fish that can attain a mass of over 500 kg. According to the FAO Species Catalogue swordfish is primarily a warm water species and its migration pattern is towards temperate or cold waters for feeding in summer and back to warm waters in autumn for spawning and overwintering. The swordfish has the greatest temperature tolerance among billfish, ranging from 5° to 27°C. In the northwestern Pacific it occurs at depths ranging from the surface to about 550 m.

Found in all but the arctic waters swordfish are hunted by fishermen of more than 20 nations. The fabled swordfish of up to 1 000 kg are no longer found and only one species exists. Swordfish is in a culinary class of its own. It is rich in protein and fat with a substance similar to that of beef but with all the health benefits of fish.

Roy Marsden, managing director of Namibian Fishermen, intrigued by whether swordfish could occur in commercially viable quantities off the Namibian coast, applied for an exclusive experimental swordfish exploitation right on behalf of Namibian Fishermen. The right was granted and issued to Swordfish Namibia (Pty) Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Namibian Fishermen.

Three methods are used to catch swordfish, namely gill-netting, harpooning and pelagic longlining. Longlining is by far the most expensive method but it lands the best quality product. Another advantage is that lost gear is virtually unheard of. Swordfish Namibia decided on this method and embarked on the difficult task of finding boatowners willing to join this experimental venture.

Visits to France, Spain and the United States of America

and endless negotiations had the same result: as so little was known about the distribution of swordfish off the Namibian coast, results could not be guaranteed and the possibility of zero results made the gamble too risky for joint ventures.

The Centre for Development and Industry in Brussels (CDI) had been informed about the project and was generously assisting Swordfish Namibia in its quest for a partner from the European Union. When a suitable partner was not forthcoming, CDI agreed to support the company in its efforts to conduct the experiment alone. Despite financial constraints, the lack of an appropriate vessel and a lack of experience, two trial runs of nine and 21 days respectively, were undertaken using an old 20 metre wooden pole and line tuna vessel. Whilst catches were far from financially

viable, the important first step had been taken. Landings included swordfish of a variety of sizes up to 450-kg live weight. Several other large pelagic species including tuna, shark, pomfret, moonfish and marlin were also caught. With the information gained from these voyages and the knowledge that swordfish indeed occur, negotiations about a joint venture could be resumed.

At the time of going to press, Swordfish Namibia was operating two state of the art European-owned pelagic longliners. One deploys American style gear and is landing fish on ice for export by air to European and American markets whilst the other is fishing with Spanish and Portuguese gear and freezing at sea for export to Europe and the Far East. Fourteen Namibians are employed on the vessels along with fishermen from Portugal, Denmark, New Zealand, the USA, Senegal, Sierra Leone and South Africa. A truly United Nations effort! This project is an excellent example of cooperation between European development agencies and a new entrant into the Namibian fishing industry.

As Namibians acquire new skills, additional employment opportunities will be created. The enthusiasm of the fishermen in this new project is encouraging. As one skipper said: "Swordfishing is the only real fishing – everything else is just catching."

A great deal of research still needs to be done on abundance, migration, seasonal variation, preferred water temperatures and depths, feeding habits and many other unknowns. Said Roy Marsden: "A promising start has been made but it is still too early to predict whether or not catches will be viable and sustainable."



Swordfish Namibia was granted an exclusive experimental swordfish exploitation right.

Roy Marsden